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ABSTRACT

At Northeast Missouri State University, where faculty have directed student outcomes assessment for 20 years, assessment is expanding to include a broader university mission of developing the whole person. As assessment becomes more comprehensive, expanding into out-of-class experiences, there is a risk of losing faculty support. Three fundamental challenges are: (1) being prepared for the argument that assessing non-academic student development should be a student affairs issue; (2) contending with the perception that non-cognitive outcomes are not measurable; and (3) recognizing that faculty will want to know how the effort will be worth their investment of scarce time and energy. One way to convince faculty of the value to them of broader assessment may be to incorporate findings into the student advising program in which faculty participate. At all times, faculty commitment may be sustained by showing how new efforts are linked with activities in which they are already engaged. Key suggestions for sustaining faculty commitment include showing that additional outcomes results are not invented, that comprehensive assessment complements academic assessment, that students need continuity of experience, that cost will be less than expected, and that these efforts will have immediate local relevance. (JB)

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BEYOND ACADEMIC OUTCOMES:

EXPANDING INTO COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT

WHILE PRESERVING FACULTY OWNERSHIP

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Jean Endo
Editor
Forum Publications

Abstract

At one mid-sized state university, assessment of student outcomes has been "faculty-owned" since it began twenty years ago. This institution is now moving beyond assessment of academic achievement and cognitive growth, to include the broader university mission of developing the whole person. As assessment becomes more comprehensive, expanding into out-of-class experiences, there is a risk of losing faculty support. A sense of ownership will only be preserved if faculty participate actively in every step of the expansion. This paper identifies three challenges to sustaining faculty involvement in assessment of non-cognitive outcomes and proposes strategies to address them.

Since the mid-1970's, postsecondary institutions and their faculty have been attending to the assessment of educational outcomes. Roughly defined, these outcomes have been expressed primarily in terms of intellectual or cognitive growth of students. A variety of tools have been developed to assess this academic achievement, and student performance on these measures has provided both evidence of institutional effectiveness and the feedback needed to ensure continuous improvement.

From the beginning, faculty enthusiasm for and involvement in outcomes assessment activities have varied widely. Ferren (1993, p. 10) reminds us that "(w)here faculty are cautious about assessment, that attitude is an outgrowth of legitimate concerns. Faculty ask and administrators should be able to answer questions such as: Who benefits from assessment? What do we really want to know? Who should do assessment? Should faculty be in charge?"

Sometimes, as at Northeast Missouri State University, faculty have chosen to become invested in assessment. When this happens, it is probably in part because assessment has so far centered on those activities in which faculty are central players. Specifically, faculty ownership has been based on assumptions like the following:

- ☐ the outcomes describe intellectual/cognitive development
- ☐ the outcomes derive from experiences in the classroom
- ☐ the focus is on the curriculum and the disciplines
- ☐ the results will be used in improving the curriculum

At the same time, educators have always recognized--at least implicitly and now, with a focus on "active learning," explicitly as well--that learning does not start and stop in the classroom and that it is not limited to the academic curriculum. We recall the reminder in Hutchings (1989a, p. 14) that

> (w)hat happens in the classroom doesn't happen in a vacuum; student background and preparation, learning styles and efforts, and a range of other factors are relevant. This kind of big-picture assessment . . . means taking a broader view of college outcomes, including not only cognitive gains but the development of values, creativity, leadership, civic responsibility--important goals that have been largely ignored by assessment thus far.

We see also in the nine Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning (1992) the following two reminders:

> 2. Assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time. Learning . . . involves not only knowledge and abilities but values, attitudes, and habits of mind that affect both academic success and performance beyond the classroom. Assessment should reflect these understandings . . .
>
> 4. Assessment requires attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences that lead to them. . . . to improve outcomes, we need to know about student experience along the way . . .

As a result, a number of institutions--including Northeast--have begun to consider how

it might be possible to broaden the focus of assessment without losing faculty support and "ownership." In doing so, we recognize three fundamental challenges:

1. First, we must be prepared for the argument that assessing non-academic student development should be a student affairs issue.

2. Second, we must contend with the perception that non-cognitive outcomes--even if relevant to faculty--are ineffable, not amenable to measurement, not quantifiable.

3. Third, we must recognize the concern for costs and benefits: even if relevant to faculty and somehow measurable, will the results of comprehensive assessment reward faculty for their investment of scarce time and energy?

The first hurdle is the perception by faculty that assessment of non-cognitive outcomes is appropriately a student affairs issue, not one for faculty. The challenge here is to remind faculty of linkages. Hutchings (1989b, p. 4) points out that

> for decades, teachers and researchers alike have been aware that intellectual development is significantly affected by aspects of personal development; the cognitive and affective domains, far from being neatly separable, influence each other and develop (or don't) in connected ways. Given this circumstance, assessment aimed only at final outcomes of an intellectual character necessarily falls short. . . . The first and unique purpose of a college is indeed intellectual development, but to understand that development one needs a broader view of the whole student and of the college experience.

The approach, then, must be to acknowledge that cognitive development is the central concern of our institutions but that, to fully understand it, we must examine the whole student.

The second obstacle relates to the "assessability" of these outcomes. We must convince faculty not to settle for assessing

> . . . that which is easy rather than that which is important. We worry that we look too much at what students know, less at what they can do; too much at cognitive learning, too little at other domains; too often at one point in time, infrequently over time; and too predominantly at discrete disciplines, and too seldom at interdisciplinary knowledge and cross-disciplinary skills; and that we never assess preparation of students for responsible citizenship and participation in community, a stated goal of many institutions. (McClenney 1993, p. 5)

Astin, too, reminds us, in Mentkowski, Astin, Ewell, and Moran (1991, p. 11) of:

> ... our neglect of 'affective' outcomes. In one sense the goals of a liberal education are at least as 'affective' as they are 'cognitive.' Otherwise why do outcomes like 'citizenship,' 'character,' and 'social responsibility' occupy such a central place in our catalogs and mission statements? There are at least two problems here. First, we shy away from including affective outcomes because we think they are difficult to assess: Where is a standardized multiple-choice test for citizenship? . . . Second, our curriculum doesn't really reflect our supposed commitment to affective outcomes like citizenship. . . . the things about ourselves that we try to measure or assess are a reflection of our values: These are the things we think are important. By implication, then, the things

we *don't* assess are the things we value less!

This concern with the values revealed in our assessment programs is echoed by E. Thomas Moran, in Mentkowski et al. (1991, p. 20), who identifies

> our tendency--traditionally, at least--to measure what's easy rather than the more complex outcomes that are harder to assess. Once we start down this path, the consequences are multiple: We come to value what we measure, instead of measuring what we value . . . The trivial can too easily displace what is truly important. Moreover, we never do develop the language to talk about many of those things we genuinely value, nor do we develop the strategies to provide evidence of them.

We must therefore persuade faculty that these outcomes are, in fact, part of the institutional value-system, and that we can develop strategies to assess them. Mentkowski, in Mentkowski et al. (1991, p. 13), makes three points about attempts to develop such strategies:

> First, expanding the outcomes of college to include not only what students know but also what they are able to do has led to development of alternative assessments, including performance and portfolio assessment. Second, expanding learning to include active collaboration with others, and more reflective and self-sustained learning, has led to assessment of projects produced by groups of student and to more attention to self-assessment. Third, expanding educational goals to include personal growth has led to assessment of broad developmental patterns over time and to in-depth interviewing of students and alumnae.

These less familiar methodologies themselves constitute a related challenge to shared faculty ownership of expanded assessment. Ferren (1993, p. 2) reminds us that "even in institutions with a strong teaching mission and a commitment to gathering information on student learning, faculty do not readily understand and embrace the wide variety of assessment strategies. Portfolios seem messy. Interviews are time-consuming and hard to analyze. Focus groups include too few students and appear less powerful than final exams."

The challenge then is to persuade faculty that these alternative approaches can be just as useful as other, more familiar models. Here, faculty from arts and communications disciplines may be helpful allies. From experience in evaluating writing or art, they are likely to be more familiar with holistic grading, portfolio review, and personalized assessment. They may be receptive to the approaches required to assess non-cognitive student development, and their endorsement may help legitimize these approaches in the eyes of their colleagues from more quantitative disciplines.

Central to existing qualitative assessment activities at Northeast is the involvement of faculty from across the disciplines in both collecting the data and in analyzing the results. Our faculty members already sit on university portfolio committees, faculty are team members in the Junior interview project, and faculty interpret and communicate the findings to their colleagues. The legitimacy and significance of these results, for faculty, owes much to the perceived source of the reports. Any expanded use of qualitative assessment approaches will have to follow the same approach.

The third hurdle is true of any assessment activity, but especially so of assessment of non-cognitive outcomes: Ferren (1993, p. 3) reminds us that "(f)or faculty to be enthusiastic

about assessment, they must see clear benefits and real rewards, not just for their students and the institution but for themselves." Part of the challenge is educational: faculty must be shown that their involvement will require not simply more work but different work.

One strategy may be to incorporate the findings of our assessment of non-cognitive growth into our student-advising program. Our faculty all advise from 10-20 students each, meeting with them periodically for both schedule planning and progress reports. The most involved faculty work with students in developing personal development plans, including participation in student activities and community service. If they can be shown that a more comprehensive assessment program, including measures of non-cognitive development, can enhance their advising activities, their interest in such assessment activities may be stimulated.

Beyond the benefit to the student, we need to show some direct benefit to faculty for their involvement and continued ownership of an expanded program of assessment. Banta (1993, p. 3) reminds us again of the need for linkage: "Faculty value their time and want to use it in ways that maximize their accomplishments. Thus, in motivating faculty to take part in assessment, we must not present assessment as a new, independent activity but rather as one that is linked with work in which they are already engaged."

For a campus whose faculty are intensely involved in issues of institutional governance, an approach likely to succeed with a large number is to link more explicitly the planning and policy-making activities of the university with the information-gathering activities. That is, given the faculty's existing investment in academic governance, we can invite participation in assessment activities which will inform the academic decisions. As a result, any suggestion that student affairs staff should be in charge of collecting and interpreting such information would probably seem much less attractive.

Hutchings (1989b, p. 30) saw early on that assessment would need to become a shared responsibility:

> Assessment for improvement is . . . a total institutional responsibility, an ultimate interdisciplinary challenge. Assessment issues are cross-cutting: in class and out, student effort and faculty teaching, student preparation and institutional expectation. To get the big picture in view we need teams of people representing diverse perspectives and expertise--faculty from various academic disciplines, student-development faculty and staff, admissions staff, advisors, administrators, students, and alumni. The goal of assessment is a mindset: that quality improvement is everybody's business.

To conclude, the following suggestions are intended for any institution concerned about maintaining faculty ownership of assessment while preparing to expand into non-cognitive domains:

1. Show that the identification of these additional outcomes results from discovery, not invention. They need to be found in statements of institutional intent. Involve faculty in the search--through the Mission Statement and catalog--for unassessed outcomes. If they discover them, they may own them.

2. Stress that this is additive, not replacive. Comprehensive assessment builds on assessment of academic achievement, complementing rather than supplanting.

3. Stress the continuity of students' experiences. Learning in the classroom must be shown to

result in internalization and synthesis, followed by incorporation into behavior and attitudes outside of class.

4. Stress that the cost (in additional effort) is less--and the benefit (to the faculty member directly) greater--than might be expected.

5. Emphasize the immediate local relevance of the assessment activities. The methods are locally developed, the choices are driven by shared institutional values (as manifested in the mission statement), and the results drive institutional planning and policy-making.

6. Above all, do not let enhanced, comprehensive assessment become a student affairs issue. If that happens, it loses significance and legitimacy for faculty.

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